

Pentagon's Aides Fear MX Missile Could Be a Casualty of Law Suits

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 17 — Although the Carter Administration is close to approving a basing system for the new MX mobile intercontinental missile, Defense Department officials said today that the \$30 billion project could be scuttled by a host of legal and environmental objections.

The MX is described currently as the Pentagon's most important military program. Officials contend that the deployment of the land-based, mobile system would be crucial to reducing the vulnerability of American strategic forces in the late 1980's. Some aides also suggest that President Carter's support for the system forms a critical part of his strategy for gaining Senate approval of the strategic arms limitation treaty with Moscow.

Extent of Basing System

Mr. Carter authorized full-scale development of the MX last June, and officials reported that he was likely soon to approve a plan for basing 200 of the missiles. Known as the "race track," the plan calls for each of the missiles to be moved around separate, oval-shaped roadways to be constructed in southern portions of Utah and Nevada.

A missile, deployed aboard a huge transport vehicle weighing over 300 tons, could be moved in and out of 23 concrete shelters situated at the edge of each roadway. The entire basing system, which would require 4,600 shelters and about 15,000 miles of new roads, is meant to pro-

tect American missiles from a possible Soviet attack while not running afoul of verification requirements laid down in the new arms treaty.

While the MX basing system is said to be technically feasible, the Administration has begun to confront what one high-level official termed the "staggering problems" of gaining Federal and local permission to actually build it. Officials said that obtaining this permission could involve exhaustive disputes with environmentalists, complicated and volatile negotiations over obtaining land for the system and drawn-out court battles over local water rights.

The potential legal and political obstacles to building the missile system have led some experts to voice doubt whether the Air Force can meet its schedule for starting deployment of the MX by 1986. Noting these problems, others asserted, in private, that the MX would never be built. "Cutting the red tape that is certain to surround the MX program will make the Alaska pipeline project look like child's play," said one Pentagon analyst.

In an interview, Antonia H. Chayes, the new Under Secretary of the Air Force, asserted that it was "entirely possible to accomplish our objectives with the MX." However, she and other senior Air Force officials acknowledged that the program could be slowed down or killed through political opposition and legal disputes.

In anticipation of objections to the new missile system, the Air Force has begun an extensive lobbying campaign in Utah and Nevada to create support among local leaders for the system. At the same time, Pentagon Congressional specialists are considering possible changes to Federal land and environmental laws that would ease the way for MX deployment.

Stumbling Blocks Listed

So far, officials said these efforts had paid off. They noted, for example, that the Governors of both Utah and Nevada had expressed their support for the missile in recent letters to the White House. Nevertheless, officials listed several stumbling blocks that had to be removed before the system could be built, including the following:

¶ Assessing the environmental impact. Under law, the Air Force will be required to do extensive studies of how the proposed missile roadways would affect the environment in central Nevada and southwest Utah. Officials said that the study would cost millions of dollars and could take several years if it is required to carry out a study of every proposed missile site. The Air Force's task, they said, could be made more complicated if environmentalists succeeded in forcing the service to examine alternative sites located in other parts of the country.

¶ Obtaining land rights. While the Air Force plans to build most of the system on Federal land, Congress can exercise a veto on how Government property can be used. Although the MX has strong support among armed services committees on Capitol Hill, defense officials said that the House Interior Committee and the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee would play a crucial role in giving the Air Force access to land in the Southwest. The Pentagon has little influence with either of these committees, and some officials fear that the panels could oppose the MX plan.

¶ Obtaining water rights. While the Pentagon must obtain Congressional permission to use land, Utah and Nevada must approve the Air Force's requests for water. Some 25,000 workers would be required to build the missile system, which officials said would place heavy demands on water supplies in the arid region. Thus, officials expect to encounter stiff opposition from local ranchers who now use up almost all existing water for livestock. Officials said that in the end, the Pentagon may be forced to dig new wells or construct a costly pipeline from the West Coast to meet its water needs.

Despite these problems, Mrs. Chayes and other Air Force officials said that opposition to the system might not turn out to be as strong as some officials have suggested. She noted that while some local leaders now opposed the system, others were attracted to the employment opportunities that would be created by the missile program.

Air Force officials also said that while the entire system would occupy thousands of square miles, only a fraction of this area would be fenced off from the public. In addition, they said the Government wanted to power much of the basing system with solar generators. If this proved feasible, they said, it would lower requirements for energy from other sources and might also reduce possible opposition to the missile system from environmental groups.